

**Retrograde into the Offense in Iraq:**

Strategic Communications and the  
Positive Effects of a US Drawdown

Ryan Christ

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*The Message Is the Insurgency... Astute practitioners on both sides of the conflict have reached the conclusion that the key weapon of insurgency is a strategic communications campaign.*

*--Col Thomas X. Hammes USMC*

*All warfare is based on deception. Hence, when able to attack, we must seem unable... Hold out baits to entice the enemy. Feign disorder, and crush him.*

*--Sun Tzu*

*Gentlemen, we are not retreating. We are merely attacking in another direction.*

*--MajGen O.P. Smith USMC*

## **Introduction**

The famous military historian B.H. Liddell Hart wisely reminds, "The withdrawal should be thought of as an offensive instrument, and exercises framed to teach how the enemy can be lured into a trap, closed by a counter-stroke or a devastating circle of fire."<sup>1</sup> Unfortunately, retrograding is all too often equated with failure; however, the withdrawal has been used throughout history to achieve great military results.<sup>2</sup> Its timely employment is especially critical during counterinsurgency (COIN) operations, as the (foreign) government must look to minimize its military footprint whenever and wherever the security situation allows.<sup>3</sup> Accordingly, the US should conduct a drawdown from Iraq tied to a strategic communications message<sup>4</sup> and a condition of reduced violence, in order to draw the enemy combatants into a trap, attrite their center of gravity (CoG),<sup>5</sup> and increase security.

## **Background**

The defensive<sup>6</sup> "surge" in Iraq was not only necessary, it was long overdue, and with the "Sunni Awakening," it has created a culminating point for the enemies of security.<sup>7</sup> According to MCDP 1-0, "The objective of the defense is to force the enemy to reach his culminating point without achieving his objectives, to rapidly [sic] gain and maintain the initiative for friendly

forces, and to create opportunities to shift to the offense."<sup>8</sup> Therefore, an excessive delay in withdrawing foreign troops (the COIN offensive) or failing to realize the transition's strategic communications significance would be as costly as if a commander delayed a counterattack or failed to exploit an enemy's unsuccessful conventional attack.

### **Setting the Trap: A Conditional Drawdown**

Iraq's secular militias, Islamic terrorists, and neighboring states would all significantly reduce attacks as a condition for a US withdrawal. While the various groups fighting each other and the Coalition have different ideologies, their objectives and endstates with regard to the US are surprisingly similar. In order to further their goals, they all want and need the US military out of Iraq.<sup>9,10</sup>

For example, many of the secular Sunni combatants believe the US is now acting as an occupying force and would suspend violence in order to facilitate a US exodus.<sup>11,12</sup> This "nationalism" is common in insurgencies involving foreign forces. Many Iraqis of every class, tribe, and sect simply do not like large numbers of armed foreigners in their country. With the "awakening" of the Sunni tribes in al Anbar, all that remains between the secular Sunnis and buy-in to the Iraqi government is legislation and an Iraq secured, in part, by Sunni

Iraqis.

Furthermore, Shiite militias like Sadr's Jaysh al-Mahdi (JAM), the Badr Corps, and their supporting Iranian agents have long called for Coalition reductions in Iraq and would contribute to increased security if it was a condition for the US withdrawal.<sup>13,14</sup> Additionally, the Iranians are undoubtedly happy to have Saddam removed from power but may feel even more threatened by the US presence on their border. Naturally, Iran has a vested interest in maximizing its influence over Iraq, while minimizing the US presence there. It does not, however, have a vested interest in overthrowing a Shiite-led government or destabilizing Iraq and the Middle East along religious and ethnic lines once the Coalition leaves.<sup>15</sup>

Lastly, attacks perpetrated by al Qa'ida in Iraq (AQI) and other foreign Sunni mujahideen would decline because many of these terrorists would withhold violence temporarily to further a US departure, and fewer recruits would be compelled to join a suddenly unnecessary cause. Although Islamists have multiple motives for their roles in Iraq's insecurity (establishing a caliphate, fear of Shiite expansion, or simply killing Americans and removing the US from Arab/Muslim affairs), success for AQI and the other foreign mujahideen has always begun with removing the Coalition. Therefore, many Islamic terrorists would temporarily reduce their attacks if it would advance that

objective.<sup>16</sup> Also, the number of new mujahideen traveling to Iraq, only to remove the "infidel" Americans, would certainly decline if US troops were already leaving a semi-stable and grateful nation. Hence, a US departure from a position of strength robs AQI of one of its most effective recruiting messages.

For these reasons, a minority of Iraq's enemies is simply fighting against the American presence; therefore, a gradual exodus would satisfy this objective and inherently pacify those groups. Admittedly, many of the other insurgents and terrorists deciding to cooperate would do so only temporarily to facilitate an American withdrawal, an action which furthers their own self-serving agendas. However, the reason why Iraq's enemies enter the trap is irrelevant; what is relevant is that they significantly reduce acts of violence and sabotage to induce the Coalition retrograde.

#### **Springing the Trap: Attrite their CoG (Cause)**

Assuming the first part of this hypothesis is true, attacks on Coalition members, Iraqis, and infrastructure would subside as the insurgents are either pacified or suspend their operations to wait-out the American withdrawal. Thinking conventionally, they will recruit and resupply, while at the same time the Coalition reduces its conventional combat power,

an obvious and clever plan if this were a conventional fight, which it is not. A reduction in US troop strength and the resulting improved security robs the Islamists, anti-occupation nationalists, militias, and their foreign supporters of their center of gravity, a reason to fight or even to exist.

In this scenario, the enemy has just voluntarily surrendered his center of gravity to get what he thinks he wants, a US withdrawal. However, the war in Iraq is a fight about perception and strategic communications, not numbers of troops and tanks. The message of an inept, puppet government unable to provide security and services being run by an occupying "infidel" will evaporate from both ends, as the US begins to leave and security and services improve.

Additionally, the primary goal of the Iranians' and Syrians' destabilizing actions has simply been to remove 160,000+ US personnel, tanks, and aircraft from their border;<sup>17,18</sup> therefore, a reversal of their counterproductive actions pending a US withdrawal should be expected. None of Iraq's neighbors benefit from a war-torn Iraq, and they all realize the potential for the Kurdish independence movement and Sunni/Shiite sectarian violence to spread throughout the Middle East.<sup>19</sup> With the Americans leaving, Iraq's neighbors would feel less threatened by the US military and more threatened by the instability on their border. In fact, these uncooperative, even adversarial



nations would likely do everything in their power to ensure increased stability and a gradual US retrograde from Iraq.

### **Increased Security**

Security is paramount in COIN operations,<sup>20</sup> but several secondary benefits also stem from a troop reduction. First, bringing home US personnel sends a positive message to the enemies' primary audience, the US public.<sup>21</sup> Moreover, Americans, and their representatives will gladly back a winning fight, especially if it shows signs of the war ending.<sup>22</sup> The reduction in violence following the surge and the Sunni "awakening" have delivered the first part of this key message. Troop reductions satisfy the second.

Secondly, an Iraq completely under the control of Iraqis, with fewer Americans patrolling the streets, is a unifying goal for all proud Iraqis. A post-surge poll in Iraq found, "despite the uncertainties of what might follow, 47 percent now favor the immediate withdrawal of U.S. forces from Iraq -- a 12-point rise."<sup>23</sup> Even fewer desire an indefinite stay of such a large number of foreigners.

Finally, any reduction in violence creates an environment conducive to improved Iraqi police/military training, national confidence, and more money and opportunity for business loans and infrastructure development, all keys to a successful

counterinsurgency.

### **Counterarguments**

The initial argument against withdrawing in the near future is that 'it is a defeatist policy showing weakness that will yield the same outcome as Vietnam, Beirut, and Somalia.' On the contrary, every "war" is different, and Vietnam et al were unconditional retreats following a perceived defeat. In this case, the Coalition and Iraqi government are winning against a diverse and incoherent threat, and the withdrawal is conditional. Additionally, a drawdown at some point in the future is inevitable; how this change is communicated is critical to setting a new precedence for US withdrawals, and the current plan requires nothing from the enemy in return for the retrograde. The author does not argue for an immediate withdrawal; however, seizing the initiative and retrograding from a position of strength instead of overstaying the welcome and feeding an "anti-occupation" insurgency is a better option.

A second argument is that insurgents never negotiate in good faith. Of course, the US never could or would sit down and negotiate with all the insurgents, terrorists, and foreign actors in Iraq. This policy calls for the one-sided dictation of the terms of the transition. Fortunately, insurgents have been known to adhere to "ceasefires" temporarily when the terms

satisfy their agenda.<sup>24</sup>

Finally, one could argue that withdrawing troops would leave a security vacuum and halt or even reverse the progress of the "surge." On the contrary, the reduced violence creates the perfect environment for the newly trained Iraqi security forces to take over. Also, the withdrawal would be gradual with the remaining US troops continuing to hunt and kill the enemy alongside the Iraqis. Lastly, suspensions or even reversals of the drawdown provide commanders with the flexibility to meet this contingency.

### **Conclusion**

In the near future, the US will decide a troop reduction in Iraq is warranted, and immediately afterward, the strategic communications battle with the terrorists regarding the reason for the retrograde will begin.<sup>25</sup> Simultaneously, a tremendous opportunity will arise to pacify Iraqi nationalists and negative foreign influences by explaining the condition for a continued US withdrawal: increased security in Iraq. Failing to explain the conditions of the drawdown is a wasted opportunity. For purely self-serving reasons, these enemies of security would curtail attacks to facilitate the exodus. Many will not forget about their goals after months of reduced violence, but they will lose the passion and support of their cause. Furthermore, a

few months of security and prosperity can be as contagious as the months of escalation were in the past. The enemies' common desire for reductions in US conventional combat power will entice them to suspend attacks to a level the Iraqis can handle, thus sacrificing their cause and bringing security to Iraq.

## Appendix A

The insurgent is almost always heavily outgunned; therefore, his strategic center of gravity is invariably his cause or idea.<sup>26</sup> This cause can also be equated to a conventional enemy's combat power. When a strong message resonates with the people, the government is in trouble. Conversely, when it rings hollow, is usurped, or voided by the government, the insurgency will dry up. Retired Marine Col T.X. Hammes explains, "The idea they [insurgents] fought for was central to their resistance. In fact, they were counting on political power generated by that idea to neutralize the overwhelming military power of the government."<sup>27</sup> Take away his guns and bombs, and the insurgent will use stones and common chemicals if driven by a strong enough desire, but take away his cause, and his rebellion will wither on the vine.

## **Appendix B**

In countering an insurgent's primary message of 'overthrowing an oppressive, illegal, or occupying government,' information and civil operations are obviously preferred, whenever possible, to large-scale, heavy-handed military operations.<sup>28</sup> This is especially true if foreign troops are involved in fighting the insurgents.<sup>29</sup> Therefore, a situation exists in which removing troops from an area is ideally the action of a government force that is winning, while a losing or defensive government must go into the attack and "surge" troops to provide increased security. At some point in any successful counterinsurgency, the international/government forces transition from the defense into the offense and begin to withdraw from secured areas.

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## Notes

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5. Their cause. Appendix A.

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24. Hammes, 74-75.
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